

## What can we do to improve board/staff relationships?

*Clearly defined roles are the key to better board/staff relationships*

Many problems that occur between board and staff (paid or non paid) can easily be avoided simply by defining the roles of each. Unfortunately, that is not always as easy as it sounds. Many of our smaller organizations have working boards that wear both hats. In addition, many organizations are in a transitional stage where they may have one or two part time staff; for example, an artistic director and stage manager, and no executive director. The rest of the board is also non paid staff, depending on the committee they chair.

One of the most helpful tools I've discovered is a chart put together by JoAnn W. Kellogg and Patrick Overton (2002), for a professional development program, The Pilot Program, that illustrates both the clearly defined roles of board and staff as well as the shared areas (see page 45). If you are one of those board members who wear two different hats, this will help you define which hat you are wearing at any particular time.

Another use for the chart is to assist you as a board member, an executive director, a board chair or a staff person, to understand your role more clearly. Most of the conflicts I see on a daily basis occur when someone steps out of their role "box" and tries to assume responsibilities not within their position description. This chart can be used as a "reality" check to assist you in determining if you are involved in areas you should not be. This is not always a conscious attempt to control; often, board members or staff are simply trying to make sure the organization accomplishes its mission.

## Communication

Good communication practices within your organization are central to establishing roles in the “gray” area of shared board and staff responsibilities. It helps to get everyone together and create a dialogue about the shared responsibilities and how you are going to negotiate them. This is also a good time to reemphasize the differences between board roles and staff responsibilities and the reasons why these roles are different. Many staff members, paid and non paid, do not understand the nonprofit board member’s fiduciary responsibility to the community. On the other hand, many board members do not understand the daily operations and minutia of the organization. Better communication of these roles within a confirming climate can make a real difference in preventing conflict and perpetuating the effectiveness of the organization in fulfilling its mission.



## IDEAS & TOOLS TO USE THIS INFORMATION

### **As a Board Member:**

- Understand the difference between your roles and responsibilities and those of the staff.
- If you are wearing both the hat of a board member and the hat of a volunteer staff person, be aware of the difference in those roles and be willing to give up one of those roles as the organization develops.
- Be cautious about getting involved in personnel matters regarding staff other than the executive director.
- Avoid micromanaging the organization. Understand your policy and governance role.
- When you plan a visit to the office, make an appointment or call ahead to let the staff know.
- Ask for input from staff when making decisions that will have an impact on the operations of the organization. Respect the staff/administrator as a competent source of organizational knowledge.
- Do what you say you'll do. Follow through.
- Be careful about treating staff members like faceless, menial workers. Commend them when appropriate and be courteous. Celebrate the organization's accomplishments with them.

### **As a Board Chair:**

- Have the board formulate a communication plan that includes how to contact board members and staff as well as public relations, marketing, and advocacy communication policies.
- Remind the board of confidentiality when making decisions or discussing sensitive issues.
- Your relationship with the executive director directly influences the relationships between board and staff. Have an ongoing dialogue with the executive director about the organization and show respect for his/her input.

- Invite the executive director/staff to contribute information when making decisions as a board.
- Always let the staff know when you are planning a site visit.
- Celebrate with the staff and always keep a sense of humor.

### **As an Executive Director:**

- Keep updated information to contact board members and staff.
- Contribute information freely when asked by board members and the board chair.
- Be willing to have ongoing dialogue about implementation of the strategic plan with the board.
- Make sure that all board members get the same information at the same time.
- Assist the board in developing a Communication Plan to include communication policies for advocacy, public relations, marketing plan and board/staff communication practices.
- Keep the board informed of the staff's capacity to carry out the mission and strategic plan. If there are gaps, let the board know. Giving the board a realistic picture of future capacity is also helpful.
- Celebrate your organization's successes with the board.

## The Buck Stops WHERE?

### GOVERNANCE (BOARD)

**VALUES/VISION/MISSION**

**SCOPE LIMITATIONS**

**FIDUCIARY OVERSIGHT**

**LEGAL COMPLIANCE**

**PROVIDE FOR  
ADMINISTRATION**

**POLICYMAKING, including  
but not limited to:**

- Allocation of dollars
- Accountability  
protocol
- Board/staff  
communication

### SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

Those functions that are not fixed legally with the Board and contribute to the vitality and well-being of the organization. For example:

- Defining Community Standards
- Programming: Design/Implementation
- Public Relations/Communication
- Fundraising
- Best Practices
- Organizational Accountability

**DAY TO DAY OPERATIONS  
(dollars, people, work)**

**ARTISTIC KNOWLEDGE  
INSIGHT AND INTEGRITY**

**IMPLEMENTATION OF BOARD POLICY**

**EVALUATION (Did your work make a  
difference?)**

### ADMINISTRATION (STAFF)

